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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000945

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [PHUM](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: VENEZUELA ON THE VERGE OF A PURGE

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor, for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

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Summary  
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1. (C) The GOV appears to be engaged in a broad effort to ensure loyalty and punish opposition using the list of persons who signed the recall petition against President Hugo Chavez. Since the beginning of March, reports have emerged of GOV offices and state enterprises using signature data from the National Electoral Council (CNE), accessible by internet, to vet employees, new hires, and beneficiaries of various government services such as identity cards. Threats of dismissal against public employees are rife, though specific cases are difficult to confirm. Labor representatives are protesting loudly but hold out little hope that the Attorney General and Human Rights Ombudsman will intervene. The new push appears aimed at intimidating people into retracting their signatures, reinforce the GOV's theory of "mega-fraud," and, in the long run, cleanse the bureaucracy of those who do not support President Chavez's political agenda. End summary.

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The Threat Is Mightier Than the Pen  
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2. (C) President Hugo Chavez made clear in October 2003 that those who signed the opposition's petition to recall him would be remembered "for 100 generations" and would have to face the consequences of their actions. Reports abounded during the November 28 - December 1 signature drive of threats against public sector workers who intended to sign. With the prospect of a signature appeals process on the horizon, during which people can retract their signatures, the GOV seems to be throwing out all the stops to force signers to recant. Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) Deputy and member of the pro-GOV campaign committee William Lara reportedly urged party loyalists to "locate, counsel, convince, organize, and transport to appeals centers" at least 200,000 petition signers. This so-called "Victory Plan" would be carried out by GOV vice ministers and other high-level officials on the national, state, and local level.

3. (U) MVR Deputy Luis Tascon has posted the National Electoral Council's (CNE) signature data on his website, [www.luiistascon.com](http://www.luiistascon.com), purportedly for people to lodge fraud complaints against the opposition. The website, however, has become a ready resource for Chavistas to check the loyalty of government workers and recipients of government benefits. Another source for the petition data is the pro-Chavez weekly tabloid "Temas." The newspaper has published supplements over the past four weeks containing the more than three million identity card numbers of persons who signed.

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The Wages of Signing  
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4. (C) Poloff met on March 17 with a group of labor leaders of the Confederation of Workers of Venezuela (CTV) and Unapetrol, comprised of ex-PDVSA workers, to hear an array of complaints of threats and dismissals related to the presidential recall referendum signatures. The labor representatives showed Poloff a list of several hundred workers of the Guyana Corporation of Venezuela (CVG) that is reportedly being used by a new office in the state-run corporation charged with identifying petition signers. CTV Executive Secretary Antonio Suarez told of a new hire at the Ministry of Education who was told she could not begin work until she went to the personnel office to file a complaint against the opposition for allegedly "stealing" her signature. A hospital director in Falcon State reported that the GOV had circulated a list of health workers and their family members who had signed the petition. The labor representatives also linked the dismissal of some 17

professionals of the Vargas State development corporation to

the signing of the petition. Workers unwilling to recant, they assert, have also been denied vacations, food stipends, and scholarships for their children as well. A March 15 press report also alleges that 200 Caracas Metro workers have been fired.

15. (C) Unapetrol President Horacio Medina said threats had been renewed against PDVSA employees who signed. PDVSA President Ali Rodriguez said during a press interview on March 15 it "could not be discounted" that a persecution campaign was underway in that state-owned oil company. Medina said a list at one PDVSA site in Caracas identifies employees who signed as "traitors to the nation." Some 834 active employees and 1,200 contractors have been identified. Medina said they knew of 34 employees who have gone to the Attorney General's office to complain. The lists reportedly identify some 5,000 retired PDVSA workers, whose continued pension payments have been threatened, according to the labor representatives.

16. (C) The harassment is not limited to the GOV and state enterprises. Pro-Chavez western Venezuela regional daily "Diario Panorama" Human Resources Manager Francisco Ferrer (protect), whose family has minority shares in Panorama, told IO March 13 that the GOV had asked Panorama to provide it with a list of Panorama employees and to cross-check the list with the list of presidential referendum recall petitioners. Francisco found that about 75 percent of Panorama's employees signed the petition. He fears that the GOV will press Panorama to "convince" its employees to recant their signature or face unemployment. While Panorama President Esteban Pineda is openly pro-Chavez (most interlocutors, including Ferrer, think Pineda's loyalty is driven by monetary interests, not by ideology), Ferrer opposes the Chavez government.

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Litmus Test For GOV Services  
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17. (C) The labor representatives cited several additional examples of pressure tactics in government services. They said, for example, identity cards, which are necessary to vote, are often inexplicably delayed for people that signed the recall petition. Foreigners, they claimed, were receiving express naturalization on the condition they not participate in a presidential referendum. They said the enrollees in the GOV's unemployment program "Mision Vuelvan Caras" ("Mission About Face") are routinely cross-checked against the Tascon website. The wife of a driver in the Embassy was told she was not eligible for a slot in a public university because she had signed the petition. There have been allegations in the press that passports are also being withheld from signers, but anecdotal evidence indicates this problem is routinely circumvented by paying higher prices to facilitators.

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Labor Groups Make Symbolic Stand  
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18. (C) The labor representatives noted that Labor Minister Maria Cristina Iglesias turned the table on them during the signature drive, arguing that anti-Chavez private companies threatened their employees into signing. This latest round of threats, the labor representatives said, has primarily targeted contractors and untenured workers, who have been ostensibly fired due to "restructuring." Organized labor's response has thus far been limited to public denunciations. They hope to bring some cases before the Attorney General and Human Rights Ombudsman, though they believe that both institutions are subordinated to GOV politics and will not intervene.

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Comment  
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19. (C) These firings and harassments complement the large fines assessed this week against opposition media, and the arrest warrant for opposition Baruta mayor Enrique Capriles. To be effective, the GOV's intimidation campaign needs to cow enough signers while not drawing a backlash of resentment during the appeals process. We think it is likely, therefore, that the firings of mostly small pockets of workers will continue. Obsessed with regime survival and willing to trample labor rights, the GOV may achieve some short-term goals with its strategy. First, forcing recanters to file complaints with prosecutors supports President Chavez's allegations that the opposition fraudulently collected the signatures. Second, the GOV will need to erase as many signatures from the opposition's petition as possible if there is an appeals process. Third, it will make the bureaucracy more loyal, and more pliable, in the long run.  
SHAPIRO

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